

National Heritage Team of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Oral History Program
Subject/USFW Retiree: Olson, Kent
Location: Littleton, Colorado
June 22, 2005
Interviewed by: Jonathan Schafler:

Jonathan Schafler::
Please give me your full name and date of birth, Kent.

Kent Olson:
My name is Kent Norman Olson, and I was born April 3, 1928.

Jonathan Schafler::
What was your place and date of birth, date you gave me?

Kent Olson:
April 3, 1928 in Minneapolis.

Jonathan Schafler::
And your parents?

Kent Olson:
My mother's maiden name was Alderman, Madge Alderman. My dad's was Norman, Norman Olson.

Jonathan Schafler::
What were their jobs and education?

Kent Olson:
Mom was a school teacher and dad worked for the railroad as a foreman.

Jonathan Schafler::
Where did you spend your early years?

Kent Olson:
Well, much of that time was spent in Minneapolis. At the same time, we'd go up to my mother's home town and I would spend the summers there, and we also lived down in Hudson, Wisconsin on the St. Croix River, which is part of the boundary between Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Jonathan Schafler::
And how did you spend those years?

Kent Olson:

Well, we spent a lot of time outdoors. My grandfather, my mother's father, was quite a hunter and also a fisherman. So, we'd go up to this small town in Minnesota, we spent a lot of time fishing, fishing for walleyes, northern pike, and large-mouth bass on a lake that was really pristine, a beautiful lake down at Hudson, Wisconsin. My life down there from about age 9 to 11, it was very much like a Tom Sawyer existence, say circa 1937.

Jonathan Schafler::

Barefoot in the river?

Kent Olson:

That's about it, yeah. We spent a lot of time on the river and learned an awful lot, playing around the St. Croix and the same with my time up there in central Minnesota; he was a good teacher, and he knew a lot about plants and animals.

Jonathan Schafler::

Did he impart any of that to your father?

Kent Olson:

Some to dad, yes some, but mainly it was directed to me. Dad grew up in St. Paul and never really had much background in hunting or fishing, but over the years he learned and really became a real skilled hunter and fisherman.

Jonathan Schafler::

And he imparted some of that knowledge to you?

Kent Olson:

Yes, that's right, I picked up some.

Jonathan Schafler::

So your grandfather was a big influence on you?

Kent Olson:

Yes, he certainly was. His name was Martin Luther Alderman. He had a grocery store in Gray Eagle, Minnesota, with a population of about 425. I would work in that store, help him out during the summers, and then towards the end of the day, maybe 4 o'clock, something like that, he would turn management of the store over to his wife and we'd go out fishing.

Jonathan Schafler::

That was good! How old were you when he passed?

Kent Olson:

Oh, let's see, I was probably about 20.

Jonathan Schafler::

Age 20, so you got to know him pretty well?

Kent Olson:

Oh yes, very much so.

Jonathan Schafler::

What kind of jobs did you have as a child?

Kent Olson:

What kind of jobs did I have? Well, I helped grandfather, we would candle eggs; farmers would bring in chickens and eggs, and one of my jobs was to look at each egg to make sure that it was still fresh and that there wasn't a little chick inside. We'd do that, and then on Saturdays we would take all of the eggs that we had bought from farmers, and the chickens, and we'd run them over to Sauk Centre in Minnesota at the Swift Plant. That was one of my major jobs.

Jonathan Schafler::

Swift was a chicken processor?

Kent Olson:

Yes, right, yep.

Jonathan Schafler::

Did you hunt and fish much?

Kent Olson:

When I was a kid I'd tag along on hunting trips, kind of walk along when they were hunting ruffed grouse or pheasants, and then when I got to be about 14 or so, one of my relatives, my Uncle Dean, gave me a 22-gauge so I could participate a little more actively. And we fished all the time; I caught my first fish up there at my grandfather's place in a lake called Birch Lake, a beautiful lake.

Jonathan Schafler::

When was the last time you were back there?

Kent Olson:

Oh, Doris and I went back there about 10 years ago. My last aunt up in that town died, and we went up there shortly before she passed away.

Jonathan Schafler::

What high school did you go to?

Kent Olson:

It was Robbinsdale High in one of the suburbs of Minneapolis. Unfortunately, they bulldozed that high school out the other day. It was built in 1936 by the WPA (Works

Progress Administration), and it was really a superb building, really nice. But they kind of overbuilt in that district; they put up two more high schools, when they actually probably only need maybe one and a half, something like that. So yeah, the high school is gone now; all those trophies and the cabinets that were in the main hall of the high school are kaput!

Jonathan Schafler::
And you wonder where the trophies went.

Kent Olson:
You kind of wonder, you kind of wonder.

Jonathan Schafler::
How about the house you were born in, is it still standing?

Kent Olson:
Yeah, it's on Glendale Avenue in north Minneapolis.

Jonathan Schafler::
A little spendier than when your folks bought it back then.

Kent Olson:
Yeah, it's got some years on it now, and the whole neighborhood has changed totally. For the most part now it's a minority neighborhood, totally different than it was when I was a kid.

Jonathan Schafler::
When did you graduate?

Kent Olson:
I graduated from high school in that final year of 1946, and I graduated from college in 1951 with a degree in pharmacy.

Jonathan Schafler::
From where?

Kent Olson:
University of Minnesota.

Jonathan Schafler::
What aspect of your formal education equipped you for the future?

Kent Olson:
Oh, I think a lot of the science courses that I took, both in pharmacy and later on in wildlife management helped give me some skills that I could use. But I think a lot of that

just depends on your early childhood, things that you learned as a kid. I think they're real important in causing one to develop these skills or expand on them as you grow older.

Jonathan Schafler::

Who most influenced your education and career track?

Kent Olson:

Well, I can't think of anybody in particular. But I remember one day I was working in a drugstore in Robbinsdale as a pharmacist, and I happened to see this teacher that came in to buy something in the store, and I recognized her as my 8th grade art teacher and she remembered me, and she said, "Oh, you've gone into pharmacy?" And I said, "Yes." She said, "You never did anything with your art talents?" And I nodded. Well, that bothered me because I knew I had some skills, and I never really had developed them any.

Jonathan Schafler::

Give me your first recollection of drawing.

Kent Olson:

Oh heck, as a little kid, I could draw way before the time that I could read. I remember in kindergarten, our teacher one time said that several of my drawings that I had done in that class were being put up in the Minneapolis public library, which was a real nice, you know, thing to do.

Jonathan Schafler::

Was your first medium pencil or was it chalk?

Kent Olson:

Oh yes, it was pencil; I've been with pencil most of my life, I've done a lot in pencil. Later on I did pen and ink and brush and ink. But I'd always lay out my drawings; I'd rough them out first in pencil and follow it up with a finished drawing in ink.

Jonathan Schafler::

Did you ever do anything in oil?

Kent Olson:

A little bit. Down in Quincy, Illinois, when I worked on the Mark Twain Refuge, I belonged to an oil painting class down there. But then I transferred up to South Dakota, and that was kind of the end of my oil painting career.

Jonathan Schafler::

In college did you have any mentors or folks that stuck with you?

Kent Olson:

No, I really can't think of any.

Jonathan Schafner::
Were there any adverse influences?

Kent Olson:
As far as art goes or such?

Jonathan Schafner::
Your college career and your early years?

Kent Olson:
Okay, I think one thing would be that I was a little concerned about going into art full-time, I thought I might starve today, and that's mainly why I, at least initially, went into pharmacy, because jobs were there, and they paid pretty well. But later on, my path in life took me back to artwork.

Jonathan Schafner::
Any military service?

Kent Olson:
Yes, I joined the National Guard in 1948 in Minneapolis. Harry Truman, God bless his soul, called us up in 1950, and I was in the Army then from 1951 to 1952, those two years. Most of my friends went to Korea, but I had just gotten a degree in pharmacy and they put me in a hospital at Fort Custer, Michigan, and I spent most of my time there filling prescriptions; had a real good deal.

Jonathan Schafner::
So that pharmacy worked out all right for you!

Kent Olson:
No complaints at all!

Jonathan Schafner::
Doris, since you're here I'm going to ask the same career questions of an employee spouse with the following other options: How long have you two been married?

Kent Olson:
It's been about 17 years.

Doris Olson:
Yeah, it's been about 17 years. I can never remember; I always ask him how long we've been married!

Kent Olson:
Actually, we've known each other for about 20 years.

Jonathan Schafler::
And where were you born, Doris?

Doris:
I was born in Baird, Nebraska, which is in the panhandle of Nebraska, near Scottsbluff.
It's a little farm area.

Jonathan Schafler::
And who were your parents?

Doris:
My mother was Ruth Tilden, her maiden name. And my dad is Elmer Hood.

Jonathan Schafler::
Elmer? There's a town in New Jersey named Elmer that I drive through all the time.
There are not too many Elmers out there. And where did you spend your early years?

Doris:
Right there on the farm.

Jonathan Schafler::
And hobbies and things like that?

Doris:
I really didn't have any hobbies. We worked. We had a lot of work to do.

Jonathan Schafler::
Was that a dairy farm?

Doris:
No, it was an irrigated farm; beats, corn, potatoes.

Jonathan Schafler::
So most of your jobs were farm jobs?

Doris:
Yes, they were.

Jonathan Schafler::
Where did you go to high school?

Doris:
I went to high school in Baird, about 7 miles away. My brother drove the first two years of high school, and then he graduated and I got to drive the car and drive into town.

Jonathan Schafler:
And what car was it?

Doris:
I think it was an Oldsmobile, a real old Oldsmobile.

Jonathan Schafler:
You don't remember the year, huh?

Doris:
I can't remember the year, but it was an old one.

Jonathan Schafler:
Did you attend university?

Doris:
No, I did not.

Jonathan Schafler:
Okay. Was there anything significant about your education that you remember, your high school years?

Doris:
No, nothing particular about high school; I really didn't like school. I graduated and then I just married and started a family, and then I went back to school when I was about 40 years old, a junior college here in Denver.

Jonathan Schafler:
And got a degree?

Doris:
Medical records accreditation, a two-year program that took me three years to complete it, but...

Jonathan Schafler:
I was in that same program for college, it took me five years! And then you went to work here in the Denver area?

Doris:
Yes, I did; I worked for the Mental Health Center.

Jonathan Schafler:
And that's where you met Kent?

Doris:
Yes, right. He was one of our patients!

Jonathan Schafler:

I had to throw that one in there! How did you two meet?

Kent Olson:

Well, our church had a trip to Europe, and we met on that trip. And I might just as well get a plug in; that's Riverside Baptist Church. As I recall, we really met for the first time in Munich at that restaurant there.

Jonathan Schafler:

What was the name of the restaurant?

Kent Olson:

You know, I don't recall off hand.

Jonathan Schafler:

Your mind was on other things!

Kent Olson:

I guess so, yep.

Doris:

(unclear)

Kent Olson:

Yeah, they had a passion play and we took that in too, Oberammergau, in Germany. If you can say that name, you can just about say any name! Had a good trip, enjoyed traveling and, certainly, I feel really blessed that I met Doris at that time.

Doris:

My dad was with me on the same trip, so we were traveling companions. He and Kent were talking a lot, and I thought that was really quite interesting that....

Jonathan Schafler:

You used her dad to get to her!

Doris:

He took such an interest in my dad! But the thing that really impressed me was when we were getting on and off the trains and on and off the airplanes, that Kent was always helping the older ladies, the single ladies, and I thought, "Wow, that would really be nice to know someone like that." That was my first impression. You didn't know that did you?

Kent Olson:

No, I didn't know that.

Doris:
You learned something!

Jonathan Schafler:
Well, I'm glad these interviews serve some purpose to the folks who are doing the interviews, which is very...

Kent Olson:
Yes.

Jonathan Schafler:
Kent was still working for the Fish and Wildlife Service when you met?

Doris:
Yes, yes he was.

Jonathan Schafler:
What's been your impression of his career?

Doris:
You know, I think Kent only worked about 2 or 3 years, something like that.

Kent Olson:
That's about right, yeah.

Doris:
And then he retired. So I really wasn't involved in any of his earlier years.

Kent Olson:
She probably figured I had one of these cushy government jobs, you know!

Doris:
You didn't have! I still think you did!

Jonathan Schafler:
We won't go there!

Doris:
And then five years after he retired, then I retired.

Jonathan Schafler:
And when did you marry?

Kent Olson:
That would be 1988.

Jonathan Schafler:
And where?

Kent Olson:
In town, well actually, Colorado Springs.

Jonathan Schafler:
And you have how many children?

Doris:
I have three; one is deceased and two living children, a son and a daughter, both living here in Littleton in the area.

Jonathan Schafler:
Oh, living in the area. You're never moving! Going back to Kent, why did you want to work for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service?

Kent Olson:
Oh, I certainly enjoyed the outdoors, and I thought, in addition to say, doing some biological work for the service, I could probably get into public education and do some things with my skills in art. I had some friends that worked for the service, Jim Gillett would be one, and several others, and they certainly enjoyed the work they were doing, and I thought I could follow a similar path.

Jonathan Schafler:
Jim Gillett is big in the retiree's group.

Kent Olson:
Oh he is?

Jonathan Schafler:
Yes, he'd doing good things. What was your first professional position; state, federal or other?

Kent Olson:
Well, I worked for the State of Minnesota in their Fish and Game Department a couple of summers out of Winona, Minnesota and the Prairie Pothole Country. Then from there, I joined the Fish and Wildlife Service, and my first job there was down at Crab Orchard Refuge in southern Illinois.

Jonathan Schafler:
What did you do for Minnesota for your summer job?

Kent Olson:
A crew leader of a duck banding crew, we banded ducks all summer.

Jonathan Schafler:
What did you do at Crab Orchard?

Kent Olson:
I was a trainee.

Jonathan Schafler:
A refuge manager trainee?

Kent Olson:
Yes, they had me doing everything; counting trees, counting geese, counting ducks. It was a good job, very interesting, and I certainly enjoyed it down there.

Jonathan Schafler:
Having worked at Crab Orchard myself, I know that it is a very interesting refuge, with a bomb making facility, and now a superfund clean-up site. It has its own railroad, its own fire departments, its own police department, and kind of an urban refuge surrounded by a lot of different people. It's quite the different place to work. Any impressions on that?

Kent Olson:
Well, I guess my thought at Crab Orchard was management was pretty much from the northern states, whereas the work crew was from the local area. I always thought there was a little friction between those two groups. But, overall, I think we did a good job down there.

Jonathan Schafler:
It was a wonderful refuge. So anyway, what was the pay and benefits?

Kent Olson:
Well, I think I started out at about \$3800.00 a year. Initially, we didn't have any health benefits. They came, I think, in the early '60s, and I started at Crab Orchard in 1958. I think one the things I really learned at Crab Orchard, I really picked up a lot of information on trees. Crab Orchard is kind of in a transition zone, from the trees of the south to those of the north, so I picked up a lot of information on tree species.

Jonathan Schafler:
Was there a science of the day there? I mean it's different than now. Is that where you learned a lot of the day-to-day activities of working for refuges?

Kent Olson:
I think so, yeah. I kind of watched the refuge manager and our project leader just to see how they were handling their jobs, and how they got along with personnel and things like that. That is probably the most important, I think, on any job. Accumulation and knowledge is important, but either success or failure depends on your ability to get along with other people. I think that's where I picked up some good information.

Jonathan Schafler:

Any mentors there at Crab Orchard that maybe took you under their wing?

Kent Olson:

I had a guy by the name of **Al {Menke}**. Al was a fighter pilot in the Second World War, he flew B-51s. He gave me a lot of help, he really did.

Jonathan Schafler:

Was he there when you left?

Kent Olson:

No, he had transferred out about a year before I left.

Jonathan Schafler:

No contact with him?

Kent Olson:

No, but there's an interesting episode with Al. He went up on his first combat mission over Germany on a B-51, and he was shot down by a Messerschmitt 109, and he said after the pilot could see that Al's plane was spiraling to the ground, this Messerschmitt pulled up alongside of him and waved at him. He said when he came down, he parachuted to earth, he said German civilians almost killed him, and if it hadn't been for the Army, the German Army, he would have been killed. The German Army rescued him and saved his live.

Jonathan Schafler:

And took him prisoner?

Kent Olson:

Yeah, took him prisoner then, yeah.

Jonathan Schafler:

Wow! Where did you go from Crab Orchard?

Kent Olson:

I went up to Mark Twain Refuge, and that was another really good job, I really enjoyed it up there. We worked out of Quincy, Illinois. There is a series of islands that are near the Quincy area, including the Gardner Island, and we managed wildlife there, mostly ducks and geese.

Jonathan Schafler:

What was your job series and grade?

Kent Olson:

It was about the same; I had gotten an increase in grade, I had gone from a 5 to a 7, and I had a real good boss down there, Arch Meerhoff, a very knowledgeable fellow. We had

some fine times there on the refuge. I used to take a young boy out with me quite frequently, his name was John Meyers, and John was terribly enthusiastic, and he also was quite a talker, he hardly ever slowed down in his talk! I remember one time I took John out, it was late in the day and we were going to band wood ducks. So we crossed that half mile river out to the island, and I told John, "You stay right here near the office." We had an office and maintenance shed on the island. And I said, "You sit right here, right on the edge of the woods and look out across that meadow, and you'll see just hundreds of wood duck coming in to roost." He said "Oh, yes, yes, I'll do it, I'll do it." So, just as dusk was coming on I left John; I had to go about a mile or two upstream to check on a wood duck trap. I did that and came back, and as I approached the shore, I was about ready to pull the boat up, I heard this voice of John saying, "K-k-k--Kent, is that you?" John had been sitting there, he had been watching the wood ducks and this big buck deer had come up behind him silently, and he hadn't seen it come up, and the deer, once he sensed John, snorted and wheeled around. John said he could feel the hair on the back of his neck and his head goes straight up!

Jonathan Schafler:

He was scared to death when you got there?

Kent Olson:

Yep.

Jonathan Schafler:

Any contact with him after you had left there?

Kent Olson:

We did for awhile, and I've got a plaque downstairs with my name on it that he made for me. We corresponded for a couple years, and then it just kind of dropped away. He moved to Chicago, his folks moved to Chicago.

Jonathan Schafler:

He didn't stay in the service?

Kent Olson:

No, he didn't. He was just probably 13 or 14 when I took him out. Whatever he did with his life, I have no idea. He may have gotten into fish and wildlife work.

Jonathan Schafler:

Now your job at Mark Twain was assistant refuge manager?

Kent Olson:

Yes, that's what it was.

Jonathan Schafler:

Where did you go from there?

Kent Olson:

I transferred up to Miller, South Dakota and the Wetland Acquisition Program, and it was my job to pick out those wetlands that I felt were suitable for eventual purchase by the government through the Small Wetlands Program. It was a heck of a job; I think one of the best jobs I ever had. I worked essentially by myself for about 10 months, working out of this little town of Miller.

Jonathan Schafner:

Nobody else in the office with you?

Kent Olson:

No, I did my own paperwork and handled it all. We covered about, I think, 7 or 8 counties, and we'd work with aerial photographs, checking out those wetlands that looked like they were permanent enough for us to purchase, and then we'd go out and make a field check on these same areas.

Jonathan Schafner:

What year was that?

Kent Olson:

That was in 1962.

Jonathan Schafner:

And your supervisor was?

Kent Olson:

A guy by the name of Milt Reeves, I believe he is out on the west coast now. He worked out of Aberdeen.

Jonathan Schafner:

And that was the supervisor of your office or the several different sub offices?

Kent Olson:

Right, right, there was another office down at Mitchell, and another one at Webster. So we had three or four people that were actually doing the field work. Milt Reeves would, on occasion, come down to see how things were going.

Jonathan Schafner:

What was your title?

Kent Olson:

Oh, what would it have been... delineation biologist I think, something like that.

Jonathan Schafner:

How long were you there?

Kent Olson:

Well, actually in total, I worked in South Dakota for about 11 years. My initial job lasted about 10 or 11 months. I finished up that and then I transferred over to Huron, South Dakota to River Basins, and I was a River Basin biologist for a number of years.

Jonathan Schafler:

Let's go back to that job there in the small town. How many acres would you say you scoped out that ended up being contributed to the service?

Kent Olson:

Well, that's kind of hard to say, but it was a real significant number of wetland that was eventually purchased by the government. I left in about 1973, and I would say that in each of those counties I worked in there was a real fine scattering of wetlands that were purchased. They're beautiful areas. Last summer my wife, Doris, and a friend of ours, Ed Edelbrock, who used to be a realtor with the service, we went back to South Dakota and looked up a couple of retired friends of ours, and we went back just to look at some of these wetlands. I think most of the work was probably done, as far as acquisition goes, would be acquisitions in the first 10 years of the program, that would be maybe from 1974 to 1984. I think since then, they have been concentrating more on what they call grassland easements.

Jonathan Schafler:

What was your impression of these lands that you revisited that you helped establish? Were they all flourishing?

Kent Olson:

Things looked good.

Jonathan Schafler:

This is 30 years later.

Kent Olson:

Yes, 30 years later, yeah. The wetlands looked fairly good; it was kind of a dry year, so some of the wetlands were dry. But, overall, the habitat looked good. We went over to Lake Thompson. When I worked in South Dakota, the core of Lake Thompson had about 7,000 acres in size, and they had a series of real wet years, and now it encompasses about, oh say, maybe 18,000 acres. It's really a tremendous marsh right now. We checked that out, and then we looked at a lot of these wetlands that delineated and had been purchased. Also, we looked up some of our old friends in Miller. There's one fellow there in particular, Jim Miller, we looked him up and had a grand time with Jim.

Jonathan Schafler:

How were relations with the local communities that you were doing the work on? You were going to these farmers, looking at these wetlands; were there ever ill feelings with the community over acquisitions?

Kent Olson:

Oh, there's always going to be some hostility. But I'd say, overall, the relations with the farmers were real good. I think as a group, you can't beat farmers for understanding and hearing you out, and just being very accommodating. I met on my job hundreds of farmers over the 11 years I worked there, and I was, overall, just real pleased with the way things went. They are really a neat group of people.

Jonathan Schafler:

Amazed they're still feeding us. Who was your supervisor on that job?

Kent Olson:

Well, George Jonkel, he was in River Basins, he was my supervisor for a number of years.

Jonathan Schafler:

Then you moved to Huron?

Kent Olson:

Yes, that's when I was in Huron, and George was supervisor there.

Jonathan Schafler:

And your title there was?

Kent Olson:

Oh, wetlands biologist.

Jonathan Schafler:

What was your grade?

Kent Olson:

It was 11.

Jonathan Schafler:

Just 11?

Kent Olson:

Yeah.

Jonathan Schafler:

Okay, what years were you there?

Kent Olson:

Let's see, I moved into Huron in about 1963, and left and went to Pierre. I worked there for about a year, and that would have been about 1963 to 1974. I think one thing I'd like to mention here is that it is so important for people to get field experience and work in small towns like I did, get to know people and their thoughts and their ideas, and then get out in the field where you get to know the land itself and, of course, all the wildlife that we're so interested in. But I think one of the highlights of my career was I was able to work out of small towns for a number of years, and this gave me a background that I could use later on in my artwork, photography, and just public information work.

Jonathan Schafler:

So from here on, where did you go?

Kent Olson:

Well, we went to Pierre and worked out of there for about 10 months, and then a job came up in Denver, an interpretive job, and I put in for it and got it, and I worked in Denver for about 16 years, and finished out my career in the Denver regional office.

Jonathan Schafler:

16 years?

Kent Olson:

Yes.

Jonathan Schafler:

The position you originally held when you moved to the regional office?

Kent Olson:

It really hadn't changed much. I was in interpretation, and we had a number of other people that worked with us, but it was pretty much helping our field people to do a better job; say, telling people about wetlands, wildlife, grasslands, and things like that.

Jonathan Schafler:

So you went from a wildlife biologist to an interpretive specialist?

Kent Olson:

Yes, right.

Jonathan Schafler:

That's kind of an unusual jump, you don't see that today.

Kent Olson:

Well, I did it. Of course I went from pharmacy to....

Jonathan Schafler:

To wildlife.

Kent Olson:

Not many have done that!

Jonathan Schafler:

That's true. What projects that you've been involved in are you most proud of?

Kent Olson:

Well, I think some of the work we did, it wasn't highly publicized at the time, but there were a number of other government programs that were very destructive of wildlife. One was the Soil Conservation Services Public Law 566 Program, Small Watershed Program, and in the Prairie Pothole Country what they were doing, they were relying heavily on stream channelization, which would provide farmers with an outlet for drainage of wetlands. So, our people, and I remember the state of Georgia was very involved in this too; we just got a lot of information out on the harmful effects of stream channelization on wildlife. Eventually, this program of the Soil Conservation Service was modified to the extent that they didn't place all that reliance on channelization. Channelization was easy for them to plug in because it gave them a very favorable cost-benefit ratio. That was one of our biggest, I think, accomplishments.

Jonathan Schafler:

Anybody when you worked in the regional office who comes to mind that was a great friend or great mentor or some folks that you worked with over the years that you think highly of today?

Kent Olson:

Well, I think Harvey Willoughby, he was our former regional director, and he was always very supportive. Harvey was really a great guy, a very knowledgeable fellow, and he really had a heart for the resource. I had some coworkers that were fine people like Carol Lively; I really enjoyed working with her over the years, and another one would be Harvey Wittmier. I'd known Harvey first back in South Dakota, in the wetlands program there, and then he eventually transferred into the Denver regional office and I became reacquainted with him.

Jonathan Schafler:

What do you think the most pressing issue was that you worked on?

Kent Olson:

Well, I really think it was these other programs that were very, very harmful to wildlife. I mentioned the one there in that Soil Conservation Service Program, and then another one was the Oahe Project of the Bureau of Reclamation, whereas they wanted to convert 400,000 acres in the James River Basin to irrigation. One of the problems we had with that was to do that successfully they felt that they needed to channelize about 80 miles of the James River, which would convert a natural free-flowing river into a big ditch. That was a real troublesome issue. As it turned out, and this would be very gratifying, a group in Beadle County, and Huron was the county seat, this group of farmers, and they called

themselves United Family Farmers, and they formed up a group which really asked a lot of pressing questions about the Oahe Project. And eventually, it never came about. We had a project up in North Dakota, the Garrison Project, and that was successfully started. I don't know where it stands today. Anyway, that farmers group really, and that was a grass roots group, they really, I wouldn't say they stymied the project, but they certainly asked a lot of pressing questions about the Oahe Project.

Jonathan Schafler:

Were there any major impediments to the job?

Kent Olson:

No, I can't think of anything really major. We worked with a lot of people, and occasionally you'd find people out at the field level who just considered government workers parasites, but we'd try and work as best we could with those people, and I think quite successfully. With some folks you just really couldn't work with them at all, you had to work around them. But, by and large, we found a real receptive audience for the type of work that we were doing, and that is preserving prairie grasslands and wetlands.

Jonathan Schafler:

Any opinion on folks who really shaped the services work?

Kent Olson:

Well, yeah there was one guy that I can think of, his name was Burt (Burton) Rounds, and I think he gave us a lot of good guidance in working with people and preserving wetlands.

Jonathan Schafler:

What was his title, do you remember?

Kent Olson:

Well, let's see Burt at one worked out of Minneapolis and he was in River Basins then, and I suppose he was in charge of wetlands coordination with refuges and other divisions, but he did a fine job. Another guy in Minneapolis was Ray St. Ores, he was very supportive of a lot of the work that we were doing in terms of cartoon work and photography, and he's a good man. He still lives at Hudson, Wisconsin.

Jonathan Schafler:

Really, are you still in contact with him?

Kent Olson:

On occasion, yes. We stopped off and talked to him one time.

Jonathan Schafler:

Burt Rounds?

Kent Olson:
Burt Rounds and Ray St. Ores.

Jonathan Schafler:
Okay, good. What do you think the high point of your career was?

Kent Olson:
Well, I think it was providing the public with the information on wetlands so it wouldn't be threatened by other government agencies.

Jonathan Schafler:
What do you think the low point of your career was?

Kent Olson:
I really can't think of any low points. I think, overall, it was a pretty smooth ride.

Jonathan Schafler:
A smooth ride, okay. Do you wish you had done anything differently?

Kent Olson:
No, I really can't. I went in the pharmacy, and some people would say that was a kind of a delay in my career, my eventual career, but I think it gave me a scientific background that was very useful. And I also did a lot of part-time work in drug stores that provided me with a little extra cash.

Jonathan Schafler:
Even through your Fish and Wildlife career?

Kent Olson:
Yes, the first 10 years I worked down at Carbondale, I also worked at Quincy, and in Huron. In those old family type drug stores that are now virtually gone, I think that's kind of sad but that's just the way businesses go. It seems like most of it now is directed at Walmart, not the old neighborhood pharmacy.

Jonathan Schafler:
Right, not many of those left at all.

Kent Olson:
Very few, very few.

Jonathan Schafler:
Eckerd and all those other... maybe six or seven pharmacies in the country, that's it.

Kent Olson:
Yes, very few.

Jonathan Schafler:

A couple of that I've seen that they usually don't do very well. What do you think was your most dangerous or frightening experience?

Kent Olson:

Well, let's see, what would that be? That's a tough question. Well, I just can't think of anything that was super dangerous or anything like that. I remember working on the Mark Twain out amidst all those waterways that kind of break up at those islands that we managed, and there were some pretty tough people in there that were doing things illegally. I remember one time I was up a tree, putting up a work duck house about 30 feet or so up that tree, and a couple of guys, real tough looking guys, came out of a closed area and they were moving fast and I yelled for them to stop, and they just essentially gave me the finger!

Jonathan Schafler:

And kept going?

Kent Olson:

Yeah, kept right on going. But some of that law enforcement work that we did there could be potentially dangerous. We had a fellow that was badly shot up down there, a game agent in that same area. I can't think of his name right now, but he had taken a round of shotgun shell and it almost killed him. I had another friend, Bob Wheeler, who was almost killed down in southern Ohio. I didn't do a lot of law enforcement work, but the potential for danger was there.

Jonathan Schafler:

Did you get law enforcement training?

Kent Olson:

No, they showed us what a blackjack looked like, and we never carried a sidearm, never carry a sidearm. We'd go out and check to make sure the duck stamps were signed. I remember one time we went out and this guy was in a blind along side the Mississippi River, and he had a duck out there, a drake mallard, that had been crippled, and it was kind of swimming in tight circles, and you could see the guy had a string attached to one of the mallard's legs, and I asked that guy, and this was a drake mallard now, I asked that guy what he hoped that mallard would do, and he said, "Well, I hope it would quack a little bit." And of course drake mallards don't quack, only the hen quacks! It was kind of funny. I think one of the things that I always got a big kick out of was the humor that was involved, on occasion, in a lot of our work. A lot of funny things happened.

Jonathan Schafler:

Well, that was the next question, what was the most humorous thing that ever happened.

Kent Olson:

Well., that has to be one of them right there, yeah.

Jonathan Schafler:

The quack, quack of the captured duck?

Kent Olson:

Yeah.

Jonathan Schafler:

What would you like to tell others about your career?

Kent Olson:

Well, I think it was a very satisfying career; we did a lot of things, say in terms of wetland acquisition, that we can look back on today. We can go out and see some of these areas that are not drained marshes today, but are just as they were say, maybe 150 years ago, beautiful wetlands, and the same prairie grasslands. We also are realtors, and in buying wetlands, also picked up large tracks of native grasslands, and I've been fascinated by native grasslands ever since. Whenever we plant a little of some flowers out front, I always try to pick out a few Pasque and Prairie Coneflower, things like that. I think the tangible work that we did in terms of saving the habitat was the most important thing that we did, and something that I gained a lot of satisfaction from.

Jonathan Schafler:

How about the service, do you see from the time you entered the service to the time you left, the service changes that have been ugly?

Kent Olson:

There have been some real big changes. When I first joined the service in 1958, we had an ADC Program, Animal Damage Control Program that, by and large, was a sound program because we offered sensible service to farmers and ranchers on controlling wildlife that were doing damage to their property. Also, we've lost our research arm. And this just absolutely amazes me how the research arm of the Fish and Wildlife Service would be transferred to Geological Survey rather than kept in the Fish and Wildlife Service as it had been. That means that our Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center now is Geological Survey; it means that, I think, the bird banding office in Washington D.C. is now so also Geological Survey. And the rationale behind that just amazes me. There must have been a strong political influence in that decision.

Jonathan Schafler:

And that division didn't last very long initially either, the DRD. The USGS kind of folded after a couple of years, and now it was folded into just the branch of science for the USGS.

Kent Olson:

It's in another unit of the government now? I didn't know that.

Jonathan Schafler:

But there have been some big changes in that regard, right. Have you seen changes in the environment and the personnel for the better?

Kent Olson:

Well, I really haven't had much to do with the personnel since I retired in 1990. But I worked some with a number of people, an outstanding refuge manager at Prime Hook, and also I had a...

Jonathan Schafler:

Strike that last remark!

Kent Olson:

Also, we had, I thought, a real knowledgeable fellow who was heading up the Fish and Wildlife Service, and I think he switched to the Wilderness Society, I don't think he is with the Fish and Wildlife anymore, and I appreciate the good work that he had done.

Jonathan Schafler:

Steve Williams?

Kent Olson:

Steve Williams, yes.

Jonathan Schafler:

Past director?

Kent Olson:

Yes, past director, yeah. And some of my friends like Carol Lively, she's still working for the service, and I'm sure doing fine work, Harvey Wittmier too. So, really the success of your operation depends on the quality of the people you bring into government. I think, by and large, Fish and Wildlife has done a pretty good job of hiring people.

Jonathan Schafler:

So, do you have any photographs, documents, and pictures to donate here or copy, and I said, "Yes, we've been doing that for 2 or 3 years now." Who else should we interview?

Kent Olson:

Oh let's see, who else we should you interview?

Jonathan Schafler:

How about the fellow who is still living in North Dakota, you said Roland?

Kent Olson:

Okay, well let's see, there's a realtor up there, and I can't think of his name right now, and he is retired, and he had been retired for some time. But he took more easements, wetlands under easements than anybody else in the Fish and Wildlife Service and, again,

I just can't think of his name right now but I think that fellow's work should be spotlighted, and I think an interview would be a real good stroke of business to talk to this fellow.

Doris:

Is that the one in South Dakota?

Kent Olson:

No, that's in North Dakota. He worked out of Devils Lake.

Jonathan Schafler:

He was a realtor out of Devils Lake?

Kent Olson:

Yes, and he was the guy that took more easements than anybody else. Unfortunately, a couple of guys that I think that would be real worthwhile to interview are dead now, and one was my good friend Jim Sieh.

Jonathan Schafler:

Could you spell that for me?

Kent Olson:

S-i-e-h, he died here about 3 years ago. But Jim had a very interesting career, and he was one of the few fellows that I knew that could talk equally well to a group of say, biologists, and also a group of farmers, he just had that ability to communicate. There's got to be somebody else but I just can't think of anybody right now.

Jonathan Schafler:

There are always opportunities down the road to talk about other folks. How do you spend your days now? You've been retired for 15 years.

Kent Olson:

Well, I can get up at 8 o'clock now, say, instead of 5:30 or 6:00 as I used to. I'm an evening person, I hate getting up in the morning. So this retired situation really fits my schedule real well! I get up, we exercise every day, I have had some heart problems and so I exercise almost every day. We carve birds; have done a lot of carving on birds here in the last dozen years or so.

Jonathan Schafler:

When you say we, are you carving as well?

Doris:

No, but this retirement is...the big thing is the food issue. I am so sick of no-fat food!

Kent Olson:
I'm on a low-fat diet.

Doris:
In an upright position, so.

Kent Olson:
Yeah, that does make it difficult because we don't eat pork chops, we don't eat bacon. But they've improved that diet over the years, they have now a lot of low-fat and no-fat food available, which makes it a lot easier than it was, say ,16 or 17 years ago.

Jonathan Schafler:
Well, I'm 30 years your junior and doing the same thing. I am doing a low-fat and the carbo-carbs and I've lost some weight. It's just, I think, it's our culture that we're learning that all the things that we really enjoy eating were so bad for us, and now we are starting to come around to those ideas. There are a lot of good tasting things out there that are good for you, but you're just not exposed to them. It's tough.

Doris:
It's hard to come up with ideas for food.

Kent Olson:
Oh, I've got another person you really should interview, and that's Ralph Page. He is retired; he retired in 1991, and he lives in the Denver area. He was in the Federal Aid Program. He was probably one of the best liked and the most capable people that I worked with.

Jonathan Schafler:
Did you work at all after you retired?

Kent Olson:
No, I haven't really done any work. But Doris and I, another thing that we do is we work at our church's food bank, and that's a real interesting type.

Jonathan Schafler:
So you're doing volunteer work in the community rather than getting work?

Kent Olson:
Yes, it's gratifying work.

Doris:
We've been real involved in our church. As I mentioned before, with two little grandsons that come over real often, my daughter is a single mom and she needs lots of help, so we kind of step in and fill that gap, plus Kent has been a great mentor for these boys.

Jonathan Schafler:
Their father is not around?

Doris:
He's around but he has a lot of problems.

Jonathan Schafler:
No role model?

Doris:
Exactly.

Jonathan Schafler:
Well that's good, that's a good thing, especially some of the wildlife and ethics that folks who live in an urban environment just don't get, and you just don't see that. You stop around the country, and those folks who don't have wildlife backgrounds, and it's so important. And they never go to wildlife places, but they need to know that to save these places when they vote and whenever those issues come up.

Kent Olson:
That's right, that's very true.

Jonathan Schafler:
Any last parting....?

Kent Olson:
No, I really can't think of anything.

Jonathan Schafler:
Well, it's been a pleasure to interview you both.

(What's going to happen with this, it will be transcribed into paper and archived, and you'll get copies of the transcripts. That is the conclusion of this interview. I'm going to take some pictures of several things, carvings and things like that, and a couple of video shots, and we'll call it a day.)

Key Words: Kent Olson, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mark Twain Refuge, Quincy, Illinois, Jim Gillett, Fish and Game Department of Minnesota, Winona, Minnesota, Prairie Pothole Country, Crab Orchard Refuge, duck banding, refuge manager trainee, tree species, tree counting, geese counting, duck counting, Gardner Island, assistant refuge manager, Miller, South Dakota Wetland Acquisition Program, Small Wetlands Program, Milt Reeves, Huron, South Dakota, River Basin biologist, Ed Edelbrock, grassland easements, Lake Thompson, South Dakota, wetlands biologist, Pierre, South Dakota, Denver, Colorado, interpretive specialist, Soil Conservation Services Public Law

566 Program, Small Watershed Program, stream channelization, Harvey Willoughby, Oahe Project of the Bureau of Reclamation, James River Basin, Beadle County, United Family Farmers, North Dakota Garrison Project, preservation of prairie grasslands and wetlands, Ray St. Ores, Bob Wheeler, ADC (Animal Damage Control) Program, USFW research arm transferred Geological Survey, Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, Wilderness Society, Steve Williams, Carol Lively, Devils Lake, North Dakota, Jim Sieh, Ralph Page, Federal Aid Program, George Jonkel, Harvey Wittmier, Burton Rounds, wetlands coordination, Prime Hook,